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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

BOSTON

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CLASSICAL ART

Fourth Century Room:
Greek and Etruscan Mirrors

Department of Classical Art
Gallery Guide no. 16

GALLERY BOOK

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CLASSICAL ART

Fourth Century Room

Greek and Etruscan Mirrors

Fourth and Third Centuries B. C.

Case 5.
(Under the central window).

In Greece at the beginning of the Fourth Century B.C. a new style of mirror was devised; the bronze disc was cast with a heavy rim and finished on a lathe; one side was highly polished and was protected by a closely fitting cover, hinged at the top and having a swinging handle for suspension. The inner surface of the cover was sometimes smooth and polished like the disc, sometimes decorated with concentric circles (which also formed the usual decoration on the back of the mirror), and sometimes adorned with engraved scenes. Occasionally the cover was plated with silver on the inside. The principal decoration of Greek mirrors was a design in relief, often of great excellence, attached to the outside of the cover.

During the period when box-mirrors were the fashion in Greece, bronze-workers in Etruria continued to copy the earlier Greek form of a simple, unprotected disc with a short handle of wood or ivory, like the one held by the young girl represented on a marble grave relief in the Fifth Century Room. (A bronze Greek mirror of this type is exhibited in the Classical Court, Case 1, west end). On the backs of these Etruscan mirrors were engraved scenes usually derived from Greek mythology, and resembling in some respects the designs on the interior of Greek cups. To bring the design into greater prominence, the incised lines were filled with a white chalky substance. Many scenes are consistent compositions, drawn with precision and force, and admirably adapted to the circular field; others are a meaningless grouping of figures for purely decorative effect.

1. Rectangular Greek mirror. (?) Fourth Century B.C.

(Upper left-hand corner).

The surface of the bronze is for the most part uninjured, and still retains its original luster.

2. Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(Three parts exhibited separately).

The mirror-disc with a rather heavy rim is shown above, uncovered; a small portion of this mirror retains its original polish and golden color. At the top is the swinging handle for suspension, fastened to the hinge, which held the cover. The cover itself has broken from the hinge, and is shown below at the left, with the inside exposed. The inner surface was plated with silver and engraved with a design of Eros astride a dolphin. The relief which once decorated the cover on the outside (shown at the right) represents Thetis riding over the waves on a hippocamp (sea horse) carrying the armor of Achilles.

3. Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

Eros on a dolphin.

The original color and texture of the bronze are unusually well preserved and the design is admirably adapted to the circular field. As decoration for a mirror, Eros, son of Aphrodite, and two symbols of the goddess, - the dove and the dolphin, - are especially appropriate.

4. Small Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(Top Row).

The back of the case is decorated with concentric circles; the cover with a rope pattern round the edge, within which are groups of concentric circles.

5. Two Greek mirrors. Fourth Century B.C.

Dionysos contending with a giant.

The god is identified by the panther skin and by the high boots which he wears. He grasps a young giant, forces him down on one knee and prepares to strike him with a weapon. The violent action, the agitated drapery, the crossed legs and the strain of opposing forces reflect tendencies of the Fourth and Third Centuries B.C. when an increasing fondness for presenting incidents dramatically developed in Greek art. In sculpture of that period battle scenes often break into separate groups of two combatants, and the struggle of the gods and giants (which had been treated in Greek art as early as the Sixth Century B.C.) becomes a favorite theme.

6. Greek mirror. Third Century B.C.

Head of a woman, in relief, profile to the left. Her hair is confined in a sakkos, or cap, and there is a large ring in her ear. (Compare a gold earring in the Fifth Century Room, Case 4, Section 5, bottom row, centre).

7. Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(Exhibited in a separate box).

A Centaur carrying off a nymph.

The amorous scene depicted on the cover is quite unlike the rape of Lapith women by centaurs, common in Greek art of the preceding century. The monstrous nature of the centaur's shape is effectively concealed by a skillful foreshortening of the equine body, and the nobler human forms are brought prominently into view. The polished reflecting surface of the disc was exposed on lifting the cover by means of the ring at the bottom of the relief.

8. Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(At the left of 7).

A girl and a youth seated on a rock.

From the leopard skin covering the rock on which the figures sit, it has been inferred that the persons represented are Dionysos and Ariadne. They were looking at each other, and a hand of each rested on the other's shoulder. The group is a contrasting study of the draped and the nude human form, set in an idyllic, rural landscape,

and is in keeping with the conscious turning toward nature which begins to be strongly reflected in Greek literature and art toward the end of the Fourth Century B.C.

9. Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(At the right of 7).

Boar Hunt.

The relief attached to the cover has been adapted from some previous use; the row of holes along the bottom suggests that it was probably sewn to a shoulder strap of a leather corselet. The scene is the hunting of the boar which Artemis in anger sent to ravage Kalydon in the days before the Trojan War. Meleager and Ankaios are the heroes represented; the former is in the act of hurling his spear (a separate piece of metal which has been lost from his right hand), while at the same time he draws his sword with his left hand. His cloak streams out behind him as he rushes forward, and that of Ankaios swirls about his body as he swings a double axe above his head, grasping the handle (which was inserted) in both hands. The boar dashes across the stony ground in a furious onslaught.

10. Relief from the cover of a Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(Top row, right).

Aphrodite and Eros.

The goddess sits on a rock with a goose at her feet; Eros floats down toward her from the left.

11. Cover of a Greek mirror. Fourth Century B.C.

(Below 10).

The relief of Aphrodite and Eros exhibited above decorated the outside of this cover. On the interior is an engraved design representing Hymenaios bearing a torch and a loutrophoros to indicate his office as an attendant at weddings. The figure is silvered. The loutrophoros was a vase of special shape to hold water for the ceremonial bath taken by the bride just before her

marriage. (Such a vase is shown in a separate case in the Fifth Century Room). The torch served to light the bridal procession when the groom at evening on the wedding day led the bride to his own home.

The right-hand part of the case contains Etruscan bronze mirrors, with designs engraved on the back.

Top Row, left to right.

1. At the right a youth is playing the double flute; a second youth is just finishing a jump. A boy with a strygil (flesh scraper) runs off at the left.

2. Herakles, with club and lion's skin, conversing with a youth.

3. Two satyrs gathering papers; between them a woman carrying a basket.

4. Poseidon seated on a rock, holding his trident; in front of him a boy with a sceptre.

Middle Row.

1. Young satyr dancing; a thyrsos, tipped with ivy and bound with a fillet, is planted in the ground before him; behind him is a krater, or large vase for containing the mixed wine and water drunk at banquets.

2. Boy running beside a horse, holding the bridle reins.

3. In the centre, a woman; at the left, a youth; at the right, a winged female figure.

Bottom Row.

1. Within a border of leaves Orpheus (Apollo?) sits on a rock playing his lyre. A doe, a panther, and two ravens listen to the music. On the ground is a cista (round box, with cover) containing two alabastra (ointment vases).

2. A young warrior carrying a spear stands between a seated, winged, female figure, and a seated man.

3. The suicide of Ajax, son of Telamon. The subject is derived directly from Greek mythology, and illustrates the form of the story followed by Aeschylos in a lost tragedy. Failure in a contest for the armor of Achilles caused Ajax, in a temporary fit of madness, to attack the sheep in the camp before Troy and to slay many of them, thinking he was killing his enemies. Returning sanity brought shame and despair, and he sought to end his life, vainly, because he was invulnerable, until Athena came and pointed out the one spot, - under his arm-pit, - where a sword could enter his body. The names of the figures are inscribed from right to left, in the corrupt Greek alphabet adopted by the Etruscans, and in the Etruscan form: Minerva (Athena), Aias Telamonios.

4. A youth with a short sword dragging a grotesque old giant by the hair.